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## **Destitutionalised Reading of Gender and Caste in Baburao Bagul's Short Stories**

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### **Abstract**

In this research paper, I analyze the effects of institutionalised ways of reading 'gender' and 'caste' in Marathi literature with reference to Baburao Bagul, one of the important Dalit writers, short stories with the help of some notions and arguments from Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, Jacques Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences", Aniket Jaaware's essay "Destitute Literature" and the book Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching. Baburao Bagul's short stories re-validated the established institutionalized reading practices of gender and caste in literature set by the Marathi writers and critics, mostly upper-caste, before the 1960s. However, other Dalit writers did not venture to re-evaluate the representation of gender and caste in literature. Before the concept of 'Destitute Literature' was propounded by Aniket Jaaware, most of the reading/analysis of Marathi Dalit literature followed institutionalized ways of consumption of literature. The dominant practices of reading literature in academia as well as out of it did not spare even the scholars who claimed to be different from the hegemony. The descriptions and analysis of gender and caste were mostly on the grounds of identity politics. For example, all the essays in the Marathi book *Samagra Lekhak: Baburao Bagul* (Complete Writer: Baburao Bagul) edited by Dr. Krushna Kirwale offer the institutionalized readings of Bagul's stories, their form, content, and the characters. I attempt to critique such earlier writings and criticism written on Baburao Bagul's stories and re-read the stories in destitutionalised way.

**Keywords:** Destitution, Gender, Caste, Baburao Bagul, Antonio Gramsci, Jacques Derrida.

### **Introduction**

It is imperative to analyze and critique institutionalized reading and writing practices of literature, especially Marathi literature. Institutionalized reading and writing practices of literature here means the 'common sense' way of reading and writing. This is the hegemonic way to read and write literature. In other words, ways of writing and reading are controlled by an institution of writing and reading in every culture by the dominant groups of those cultures. One can also call such institutions the agents of the state. The institutions are maintained by leading social groups of the society; the ones who own the means of production. They decide the organizing principles of the institution and run them accordingly. The interests of those dominant social groups are looked after and taken care of while running the institution. The institutions also tend to exclude and abandon certain people and principles from their structures as they seem to be a threat to the institutions. This results into a counter-discourse, an opposite to 'institution'. Sometimes such discourse is 'destitute.' Therefore, it is possible to substitute

institutionalized reading and writing practices by destitutionalised practices.

## 1. Common Sense

Marathi Dalit Literature, as argued by many scholars and critics, is a post-independence phenomenon. This consideration appears problematic as Dalit writings did exist in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Maharashtra. In pre-independent Maharashtra, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Marathi Dalit Writing was mostly only either political or social. Some of the early Marathi writers like Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao Bagul, and P. E. Sonkambale wrote fiction in the form of storytelling inherited from oral traditions like *Tamasha* and *Ambedkari Jalasa*. In the later phase of Marathi Dalit Writing, there was a flurry of autobiographies and lyrical poems about the writer's suffering and survival by winning the battle against the odds of caste institution. This flurry had to do with demand and supply chain of the Marathi publishing industry. The consumers of these survival narratives were mostly upper castes who could easily draw ethical conclusions, arguing what is ethical and unethical, deploying their customary morality. This is how the didactic reading practices of literature set by mainstream Marathi writers in the nineteenth century continued in the twentieth century too. When these individual truths, in the form of autobiography, captured massive consumption, most of the Dalit writers preferred to write autobiographies of their successful survival rather than fiction. The demand and supply chain played a vital role here. Aniket Jaaware (2019) in his book *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching* points out: "The role of print capitalism should not be ignored here. It is precisely printed material as a commodity that opens up this domain for dalit authors." (p. 141) Since 'caste' was in the background of these narratives, the upper-caste consumers branded it '*vidrohi sahitya*', literature that rebelled against the established standards of reading and writing literature in Marathi. However, many critics and scholars engrossed only in '*vidroha*' in Dalit literature did not pay attention to the literariness of the literary. Encountering the popularity of Dalit literature most of the Marathi critics sold the 'ethical superiority' of Dalit literature to gain cultural capital. 'Cultural capital' as it would appear is Marathi critics' attempt at achieving higher social status through social mobility by contributing to the knowledge creation about Dalit Studies. Dalit studies has been one of the most sought after fields of inquiry. The critics giving in to the global demand criticized and analyzed Dalit writings, frequently, in hurry and that resulted in several institutionalized practices and beliefs about Dalit literature. These critics, it seems have endorsed the prevalent knowledge or the 'common sense' understanding of Dalit literature.

The notion of 'common sense' conceptualized, expounded, and critiqued by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks, Volume I* is used here in a couple of ways; firstly as 'popular knowledge' about things, and secondly, as institutionalized reading and writing practices. Gramsci (1996) argues:

Every social stratum has its own "common sense" which is ultimately the most widespread conception of life and morals. Every philosophical current leaves a sedimentation of "common sense": this is the document of its historical reality. Common sense is not something rigid and static; rather, it changes continuously, enriched by scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage. (p.173)

Gramsci describes 'common sense' as an element that modifies an average judgement of a particular society. If one has to use Gramsci's argument in the context of this research paper then it could be reasoned that the leading ways of reading gender and caste in Baburao Bagul's stories come out of 'common sense' stipulated among the Marathi reading public by the hegemony of literature and criticism written by upper-caste Marathi writers. 'Common sense' reading, in other words, can be called the institutionalized reading or the hegemonic way to read literature.

## 2. Institution and Destitution

Jacques Derrida in his essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in The Discourse of Human Sciences” (1970) critiques, although Derrida himself does not refer to, ‘organizations’ or ‘institutions’ through the notion of ‘structure’ or ‘structurality of structure’. Numerous theorists and thinkers counting Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and so on have defined, elaborated, and problematized the idea of the institution. Here, I am going to theorize the notion of ‘institution’ as differing to the notion ‘destitution’ and the paradox of these notions in the Marathi Dalit writer, Baburao Bagul’s short stories from his short story collections *Jenvha Mi Jaat Choral Hoti* (When I Hid my Caste) published in 1963 and *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* (Life is Getting Cheaper) first published in 1969.

Aniket Jaaware (2009) in his book *Simplifications: An introduction to structuralism and post-structuralism* argues that: “If there is any institution that is fundamental to modern culture, it is the institution of reading and writing. Ways of writing and ways of reading are regulated by this institution” (p. 425). I speculate here that the state and the agents of the state resolve and impart the ways of reading and writing to regulate the institution of reading and writing so that something which might damage the propaganda of the state could be forbidden to do so and eventually, it is guaranteed that the state remains to be the sovereign owner of the institutions and ways of institutionalization. And all that is left out of the institution would automatically fall under the notion of ‘destitution.’ The origin of the word ‘destitute’ submits that it means something that is abandoned, forsaken, and excluded from the institution. ‘De’ in destitution means taking away the institution. I am using the word ‘destitution’ as a noun denoting ‘absence of means or resources’ or ‘absence of grants and funds.’ Also, in its literary and political sense which Aniket Jaaware uses in his essay “Destitute Literature” published in 2012 and a book *Practicing caste on touching and not touching* published in 2019 respectively.

In the discourse of Marathi literature, ways of writing and reading literature were articulated in the nineteenth and early twentieth century by the upper-caste and class. “Upper” meant “forward” in social practice (“upper classes were also the most “forward” it seems), and “lower” meant “backward” (Jaaware, 2019, p. 176). In other words, the dominant social groups of Marathi writers. In case of writing literature, their writing style was built on the ancient Sanskrit texts, the Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana and so on. On the other hand, the ways of reading literature were also maintained upon and were concluded that literature is didactic unlike the Sanskrit theory of *rasas* yielding pleasure. These ways of writing and reading literature were compromised in Dalit writing in Marathi, especially in Baburao Bagul’s works. He, in a way ‘de’ institutionalized the leading reading and writing practices. Bagul preferred to write stories in a ‘de’- institutionalized way probably as Aniket Jaaware (2019) in his book *Practicing Caste: On Touching and not Touching* argues:

Because storytelling has the ability to terminate the telling at crucial points of ethical or political “destitution”, it provides a special opportunity to abandon the narrative at an ethical conundrum or even an aporia, thus allowing us, in fact forcing us, to think about it. In real life, perhaps there is much less time to *think* because it is necessary to *act*, and act *immediately*. (p. 7)

### 3. Destitutionalised Reading of Gender and Caste in Bagul’s Stories

There are dual significant characteristics that make Bagul’s stories ground-breaking. Firstly, they suspend readers from making value judgements and secondly, the impoverished characters are characterized through the Sanskrit-influenced Marathi diction by using poetic devices and language. The persistent use of the figure of speech ‘alliteration’, which is conventionally used in Marathi poetry and is believed to add beauty to the language, is used in most of the stories written by Bagul. Following is a passage from the story “Aai” (Mother) published in the collection *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* on which Bagul ends his story:

मुलाची हाक आणि दारावरची थापही तिच्या कानावर पडली नाही. अन् आई रडून रडून झोपली असावी म्हणून अधिक मोठ्याने आक्रंदून तिला हाक मारीत पांढूने दार ढकलले. पण तिला मिठी मारून उभ्या असलेल्या मुकादमाला पाहून त्याचे दुःखाने उदासलेले मन फटकन

फाटले गेले आणि आपापल्या दाराआड उभ्या असलेल्या शेजाऱ्यापाजाऱ्यांची आठवण येऊन लज्जेने त्याचे काळीज धडधडू लागले. त्याने पुन्हा धूम ठोकली आणि मुकादमाची मिठी ताडकन तोडीत ती त्याच्या मागे धावली. पण तो दूर गेला होता. मुकादम तिला निष्ठूरपणे मागे ओढीत होता. पांडू बाहेर जीव तोडून पळत होता. वस्तीतील कुत्री त्याच्यामागे धावत होती. आणि पाठीमागे धावणारी कुत्र्याची झुंड पाहून तो घाबरून ओरडून रडत होता. प्रत्येक खोलीतून माणूस बाहेर पडत होता. ती मुख्य मुकादमाच्या मिठीतून बाहेर पडण्याचा प्रयत्न करीत होती. पण चिखलात रुतून बसलेल्या माणसाप्रमाणे तिची सुटका होत नव्हती... (2017, p. 40)

The recurrent use of the sounds /p/ and /a/ in the first sentence is trailed by a recurrence of a few more sounds in the passage. These stories would have resulted into being just the shocking and morbid accounts of the underprivileged characters if Bagul would not have used the poetic device alliteration. It is necessary to note here that the stories are written in Sanskrit-influenced Marathi words but the incidences, actions, and characters shown in the stories are hardly ever found in Marathi literary tradition. Other writers while writing the miseries of Dalit characters have used prose style to signify the hardship of the characters. In this short story, Bagul re-values the figure of a mother, which has been deliberated and worshipped often in the discourse of Marathi literature written by upper-caste writers based on the belief that the mother is an ideal figure who sacrifices her comfort for her children. Some of the poems which imply such belief include “Aaisarkhe Daivat Sarya Jagtavar Nahi” by G. D. Madgulkar, “Aai Mhanoni Koni” by the poet Yashwant, and so forth. On the contrary to these poems, the mother in Bagul's story is trapped in a dilemma of motherhood and sexual desire. After her bedridden abusive husband's death, she struggles for existence. Men living around her try to assault her sexually and women curse her for having a lover. In addition to this, her son too, like his late father, doubts her sexual behaviour. The end of the story cited above signifies the mother's ethical undecidability where she, while in the arms of her lover thinks of her son's perspective towards her 'unethical' relationship with her lover. However, she tries her best to follow her motherly instinct but fails as her lover does not allow her to leave his arms. Dalit women have been facing physical and mental atrocities at the hands of Dalit as well as upper-caste men including husbands and others. Such destitution though can be seen in other examples of Marathi literature, regardless of caste, class, and gender of the characters, does not seem often and certainly not the way Bagul's stories bring it out. The characters, as well as the readers, get caught in an impasse of ethics at the end of the story.

This act of literature by Bagul seems interesting to me as he appears to negotiate the agency of the destitute to meet the demand of the publishing house. Now the question arises, why does he do so? One of the possible reasons could be readership and the other could be to avoid making destitute suffering just a dreadful and miserable version of anguish. It is to be noted that Bagul employs institutionalized diction of Marathi language to criticize institutionalized understanding of gender and caste. Where does this paradox/play between institution and destitution lead? This play seems to force consumers of his stories to enjoy reading the language of the stories leading them to an ethical destitution. In other words, even though while reading, readers get pleasure through alliterative language, they are caught in a destitute position.

Bagul's stories do not allow the institutionalized or 'hegemonic' or 'common sense' way of reading gender and caste. Literature, when read in a common-sense way then the character's actions are judged on hegemonic ethical grounds. Reading literature with the belief that it teaches moral lessons rather than providing attention to the literariness of the literary or providing special attention towards literary devices like a figure of speech and style of writing results into institutionalized reading. Bagul re-values the institutionalized reading practices established by the upper-caste Marathi writers by leaving characters as well as readers into an aporia of moral values. However, most of the Marathi critics, in their articles on Bagul's stories offer an institutionalized reading of gender and caste. These critics, could not overcome their customary morality while analyzing the stories in their articles.

#### 4. Institutionalized Reading of Gender and Caste in Bagul's Stories by Marathi Critics

Articles written on Baburao Bagul's works, published in 2002 in the book *Samagra Lekhak: Baburao Bagul* (A Complete Writer: Baburao Bagul) present an interesting analysis of institutionalized reading of Gender and Caste. In one of the articles titled *Viodrohacha Dhagdhagta Avishkar: Baburao Bagul* (A Fiery Manifestation of Rebellion: Baburao Bagul), a critic, Dr. Gangadhar Pantavane goes on to summarise Bagul's stories rather than analysing them through close reading and justifies the 'immoral' behaviour of the female characters. He argues:

There are no limits to the ignorance, poverty, and sorrows faced by Dalits. It is their depravity which forces them to lose their chastity for survival. Girija from the story *Watevarchi* becomes a prostitute but the customers cheat her and do not pay her. She stands on the street just for the sake of her child and her dreams shatter on that street itself. (2002, p. 57)

The above extract from the article represents the institutionalized reading of Bagul's story *Watevarchi* (Streetwalker). Bagul does not criticize or justify Girija's prostitution in the story. Not a single sentence in the story states that Girija was into prostitution for the sake of her son. The 'words on the page' or 'close reading' of the story does not invite the above-mentioned interpretation. Then, why Dr. Pantavane comments on Girija's behaviour? It seems to me that the critic shares the hegemonic understanding about the prostitutes that they do it out of compulsion of the family needs. Almost all the articles from the book share more or less a similar kind of institutionalized understanding of gender and caste in Bagul's stories and their criticism is limited only to offering summaries of the stories. Gender, in their articles, is looked upon through the lenses of the victimization of women. This victimization argument assumes that women do not have power and they are weak. This assumption seems extremely problematic as it suspends the further possibilities of the production of meanings and interpretations. This assumption also controls the ways of reading Bagul's stories and imposes institutionalized interpretations.

Let me draw your attention to Derrida's reasoning about structurality of structure. Any established structure is an institution. If we agree with the conjecture that the institutions are maintained by the state, then, it could be assumed that, they, by nature, are corruptible. They are venal for the reason that in the process of retaining its original motive they change. It is palpable that the state and the agents of state exert to sustain the structure in its original form. However, outside forces like people and time compel an institution for an alteration and every structure deals with those pressures in its ways. The structure of reading and writing is central to modern culture and the fundamental principle regulates and controls the methods to read and write. The state and the agents of the state resolve and impart the ways of reading and writing to have hegemony on this institution so that something which might harm the propaganda of the state could be disallowed to do so and the state carries on to be the sovereign owner of the institution. Any transgressive act of reading and writing is considered to be a threat to the institution. However, a structure cannot evade such transgressions as the structure itself consents the play of its elements in its total form. The future possibility of failure of structure has already been considered by the state and its agents and therefore, the organizing principle has been maintained which can control, restrict, and limit the play or production of meanings.

This is how the hegemonic reading of literature functions. The above-mentioned critic did not unlearn his training of institutionalized reading. The close reading of the story does not indicate that the female character is powerless and a victim of a patriarchal society and therefore, forces herself into prostitution to earn her livelihood. It seems necessary to me to bring Michel Foucault's notion of 'power' in discussion here. Please note, Foucault's notion of 'power' does not help the politics of victimhood. Aniket Jaaware (2012) in his essay "Destitute Literature", argues:

Foucault's writing- especially *Archaeology of Knowledge* does not allow any moral satisfaction or righteousness to the victim. In fact, most of Foucault's writings render the notion of victimhood *inoperable*. If we fail to see the tremendous strength that this

gives to the resistant, we will have failed to read Foucault's notion of power and truth and discourse. (p. 35)

The endings of Bagul's stories leave the readers in an ethical impasse and demand immediate political action. The political action, if undertaken, needs some power. The fact that the Dalit struggle has succeeded to a large extent is a sign that Dalits too have power. These stories prevent the discourse of victimhood and identity politics, and the romantic notion of authenticity. These three discourses have vetoed Dalit politics to become generalizable and therefore, not useful for other political struggles in the world.

The discourse around caste studies and Dalit studies always revolved around institutional ways of reading. In the initial phase, the discourse revolving around caste identities was important but it could not go beyond that, for example, in the case of the criticism of Dalit autobiographies, the discourse did not go beyond the plight of the characters and the description of their wretchedness and overcoming the difficulties.

In Bagul's stories alliteration helps to make them literary, therefore, it becomes generalizable truth about destitute beings but the critics' failure to analyze alliteration and its effects in their critical articles lead to the common assumption that Dalit literature is political and social. The loss of alliteration, here too, results in the morbid account of destitute suffering. Please note, it is the generalizable truths which help politics and not the individual truths. Individual truths and individual politics offered through Dalit autobiographies, lyrical poems, and personal stories do not help Dalit politics in general as they get stuck in Dalit identity. It is not on the survivor who survived exploitation needs help, we need to think and *act* for those who could not survive and write lyrical poems about their suffering, for example, *Khairlanji Massacre* that took place in Maharashtra on 29th September, 2006. Bagul's stories represent such generalizable truths, that too, hardly referring to the caste of the characters.

One more important example to be cited comes from the same book mentioned earlier. In an article titled *Baburao Bagul: Ek Samarth Kathakar* (Baburao Bagul: A Good Story Teller), a critic, Dr. Prakash Kumbhar, comments on the 'caste system' in the story *Bovhada*. He states: "*Bovhada* portrays the tension between upper castes and the untouchables. It mainly revolves around 'Damu Mahar' who belongs to the untouchable caste. It portrays the suffering of Dalits through the concept of superiority and inferiority of castes" (Kumbhar, 2002, p.147). This extract is a summary of the story and not a criticism. The caste system, as the above summary implies, makes some castes inferior to other castes and therefore, secondary, weak, slave, and powerless. This, too, gives birth to the assumption that Dalit beings are born powerless and therefore, face exploitation and oppression because of their inferior identity and thus, become victims of the caste system and violence. This assumption has misled the discourse of criticism of Dalit literature. If Dalit beings have been victims and powerless then how come an anti-caste struggle succeeded to a large extent in India? How come powerless people undertook the political struggle against the caste system?

It is necessary to understand the caste system as a set of 'power relations'. The oppressor, has been powerful because of the resistance of the oppressed. Foucault's arguments make it clear that power does not exist without resistance. Foucault's notion of 'power' may seem to be used repeatedly here but, repetitions are better than forgetting as it helps to remember things clearly. In that way, repetitions are a good practice for conserving certain facts in memory.

## 5. Effects of Institutionalized Reading

Literature, when taught in institutions like universities and colleges, is read and taught in an institutionalized way where it is taught that literature is something which is unreal, not true, and therefore, the students are expected to interpret what was in the mind of the poet or a playwright or a novelist while writing a literary work. On the contrary, the other possible way of reading literature is to read it in de-institutionalized way, that is, by taking away what institutions have to say about literature and reading it literally, concentrating on what is written



on the page, and what the text invites us to think, feel, and perform. Every text has its own set of invitations. The critics and their citations in the earlier section show that they have not read the short stories by Bagul intimately and have failed to identify and accept the invitations to think, feel, and perform. They could not overcome their habitual morality while interpreting the short stories which results in them failing to notice the importance of literary devices like alliteration. Their critique of Bagul's stories is a contribution to the hegemonic knowledge. The hegemonic knowledge would claim that Bagul's stories are more political as they discuss caste discrimination and anti-caste struggle than literary. Therefore, these stories have to be categorized separately as marginalized literature. This systematic marginalization is the result of institutionalized readings produced constantly by the critics and also, the translators.

It could be suggested here that the criticism produced by the Marathi critics is a sheer material production of the Marathi short stories. Literature written in Marathi before Bagul was read in an institutionalized manner. Most of the Marathi critics have been afraid to take interpretive risks and have failed to perform a close reading of the stories. Before the concept of 'Destitute Literature' was propounded by Aniket Jaaware in 2011, most of the reading/analysis of Marathi Dalit literature followed institutionalized ways of consumption of literature. The dominant practices of reading literature in academia as well as out of it did not spare even the scholars who claimed to be different from the hegemony. The descriptions and analysis of caste were mostly on the grounds of identity politics.

Literature when labelled or categorized as 'dalit literature' suspends the possibility of being universal because it gets stuck in uniqueness of identity and thus, preventing itself from helping any other political struggle. Writing articles on stories by deploying customary morality prevents the discourse from the possibilities of further development. However, the word 'destitute' suggests literature and people without grants and recognition, it is also in Bagul's stories that the reader becomes ethically destitute, this ethical undecidability opens up multiple possibilities of meaning and engagement. Therefore, Aniket Jaaware, defines such literature as 'Destitute Literature' in his essay "Destitute Literature". According to Jaaware, Bagul's stories have, repeatedly, represented the lack of "society" and of "sociability" as they do not have the privilege of being members of the institution "society" (2019, p.180) functioned on hegemonic grounds. However, it is attainable to have these characters being members of "our" society if we permit play or production of meanings or we are open to many more possibilities of knowledge creation. This hypothesis needs further detailed elaboration which cannot be undertaken here.

On the one hand, Bagul does not allow the moralistic reading of literature, on the other hand the critics attempt didactic reading. This act of problematic reading is a result of the hegemonic shared knowledge of Marathi Dalit literature that it is political and revolutionary. It is to be noted that the characters from Marathi Dalit literature could hardly occupy any space in the years preceding this phenomenon called Dalit literature. Dalit literature, as many scholars believed, is to be read differently than the hegemonic mainstream Marathi literature. But even though it was to be read differently, this 'different' kind of reading again resulted into the institutionalized reading of Marathi Dalit literature where many critics and scholars labelled it political and revolutionary which terminated it to be literary. The political anti-caste aspect of these short stories made the readers forget that Dalit writings are literature and demand to be read in a destitute manner because they were branded in a specific way.

## Conclusion

It could be concluded here that the critical articles like translations of Bagul's stories by Jerry Pinto and Mira Manvi, too, contributed to an institutionalized understanding that Dalit literature is less literary and more revolutionary. Dalit Literature might be revolutionary but not revolution itself. This confusion between literary and political and revolutionary and revolution haunts not only the discourse of Marathi Dalit literature and its translation but also the discourse of criticism of Marathi Dalit literature.

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